

*The Benefits of Contentment.*

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A

# SE R M O N

Preached at

*FAVERSHAM* Church,

IN THE

County of *KENT*;

SUNDAY Morning, *May the 16th, 1742.*

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BY THE

Rev. Mr. *RICHARD MASON*;  
Gentleman Commoner of *Mag. Coll. Oxon.*

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## PHILIPPIANS ch. iv. ver. 11.

For I have learned in whatsoever State I am therewith to be content.



SAINT Paul, in this Epistle, which begins with salutary Exhortations, among other his Admonitions, advises the *Philippians* to repose their whole Confidence in God; to be anxious for nothing; but by Prayer to apply themselves to the Throne of Mercy, whence their Wants would be supply'd, or they would be endued with Grace to resign humbly to what the Almighty should please to direct: after which, making grateful mention of their Liberality towards him, while under Confinement, he gives them to understand, his Joy was rather from the Grace of God in them, than for the Relief of his own Wants; for he had learned, through the Assistance of Christ, to do all things: to be content in whatever Station of Life. *I know, says St. Paul, both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where, and in all things I am instructed, both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer Need.* Phil. ch. iv. ver. 12. For I

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have learned in whatsoever State I am therewith to be content.

In which Words of my Text the Apostle shews us, that he has attained to the Height of human Wisdom, to refer himself entirely to divine Providence, and to contentedly acquiesce in that Situation of Life which God shall be pleased to allot. If in a State of Plenty, to receive the Blessing with Thankfulness, and to make Use of it with Moderation : if in Want and Confinement, to chearfully submit under the Affliction and wait the Almighty's good Time for his Deliverance, without Impatience or murmuring. A *Knowledge*, which makes us rich ; as Content supplies all Wants, the contented Man has no Wish to gratify ; as on the contrary, an anxious craving after more, renders the Life of the most affluent miserable. A *Knowledge*, which speaks a true Strength of Judgment ; for it makes us wisely depend upon Wisdom it self, frees us from all superfluous Care, and places our Trust on the Mercy of that benevolent Creator, who provides for the Beasts of the Fields, the Fowls of the Air, and will never desert such as rely on his bountiful Goodness. A *Knowledge*, which will alleviate the Pains of Sickness ; blunt the Darts of Adversity ; lighten the Weight of Chains ; illuminate a Dungeon ; make the severest Afflictions tolerable ; turn Ignominy to our Credit, and disarm Death of his Terrors. A

*Know-*

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*Knowledge*, which will give a chearful Countenance to the Oppressed, and dilate with Joy the Heart of the Persecuted. A *Knowledge*, which will make us look down with Contempt on all transitory Satisfactions, as too trifling for the Dignity of our Profession, and enable us to pity and despise the limited Power and Malice of our Enemies; which, they cannot extend beyond the Grave, where, their Persecutions ending, our Happiness begins, and their Inveteracy proves our Guide to eternal Joy and Peace. In a Word, *Content*, is a *Knowledge*, which by the Serenity of Mind it affords, renders our Lives comfortable, while in this Vale of Mifery, and gives us a Foretaste of that ineffable Bliss prepared before the Foundation of the World, for the humble and resigned Servants of our God.

We may observe, that all the Precepts of the Christian Religion, are productive of both our temporal and future Happiness, as may be evinced by the Injunctions they contain of the practising Temperance, Meekness, Patience, Humility, Industry, Charity, and the like Virtues. The pursuit of the contrary Vices, we know from Experience, are productive of Evils and Misfortunes, against which the Christian Doctrine is a safe Rampart, if we will take shelter beneath it.

I shall in my present Discourse confine my self to the one Virtue, which the Apostle mentions in the Words of my Text; *Content*, or in

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in other Words, an humble Resignation to, and acquiescing in the Will of God ; which is of the utmost Importance to every State of Life, whether in an affluent Fortune or struggling with Wants ; whether laden with Honours and distinguished with pompous and sonorous Titles, or dwindled into Contempt ; whether at the Feast of a *Dives*, or in the wretched State of a *Lazarus* : for the Great and Wealthy have as much need to learn this Lesson, as the Mean and Hungry. The King and Beggar, the Master and Slave, all in general who are desirous to live well, to live happily, must seriously apply themselves to the Study and Practice of this Virtue. Wherefore I shall endeavour to shew,

First, The Nature of *Content*.

Secondly, It's constituent Parts.

Thirdly, The Advantages of it in this Life.

Fourthly, The Necessity of it.

Fifthly and lastly. Propose the Means of attaining this Virtue.

*Content* in *Greek* is called *αὐταρχία* from the Import of which Word comes our *English Content*, in the *Greek* it is derived from *αὐτὸς ipse* and *ἀρκεώ sufficio*, denoting a Self-sufficiency, as every thing a Man possesses is according to the *Latin* Saying sufficient

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ficient for him, if he knows how to make a prudent Use of it. *Natura sat omnibus dedit si quis cognoverit uti.* The Idea we join to this Word *Content*, is the keeping within the Bounds of Moderation, acquiescing in that State of Life to which it has pleased God to call us; the limiting our Desires, and not being anxious for the acquiring of more Wealth, or ambitious to aspire to a higher Rank or Dignity. This Virtue, which gives so great an Ornament, as well as such a steady Peace to the Mind, is, in it's Nature, a noble, generous, open, solid, equal, humane Composure of Temper: noble, as it is a Stranger to sordid Views; generous, as it envies none; open, as it apprehends not the severest Scrutiny, and is conscious of no Thought, or Action which need shun the Light; solid, as no Disasters, no Storms can shake it: equal, as it is ever the same, in whatever Changes or Vicissitudes; humane, as it rejoices in the Good, or compassionates the Misfortunes which befall others.

The Man who possesses this Virtue, is never restless, neither frets nor torments himself, nor troubles others with his Complaints and Expostulations; never murmurs at Providence; on any crois Accident, or severe Disappointment; he resigns to the Will of his Creator, and with holy *Job*, acknowledges himself in the Hands of God, as his humble Creature, to be disposed of as his good Pleasure

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sure shall direct ; looks upon the Riches, he had enjoyed, and were no longer in his Possession, as those, which the Almighty had permitted him the Use of, for a Season, and when they are taken out of his Hands, owns with Job, the Justice of his God : *the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the Name of the Lord.* Job i. 21. He calls to mind the Nakedness of his Birth, and the Poverty of his future Grave, and is thankful for the Time he enjoyed in Prosperity, not repining, that it is of no longer Duration ; for he knows the Blessing was spontaneous, and the Deprivation of that Blessing, what his Sins may justly have merited. However, that it is the Will of the omniscient Ruler of the World.

On the other Hand, such a Man by any sudden Advancement of Fortune, is never elated ; he apprehends for his own Frailty, and is ever on his Guard against the Pomps and Vanities of the World, lest they should make him forget the liberal Hand that raised him, and his Prosperity prove a Snare to his Ruin : He doubles his Guards against Pride, and keeps up his Humility, by considering the Instability of all human Greatness : He accepts, with Thankfulness, the Good, from the same Hand, which he should submit to with Chearfulness and Humility, bringing upon him the Evil. He knows the All-wise Creator of the Universe will dispose all Events

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more to his Advantage, than he himself, had he the Power, could direct them ; and therefore, in whatever Station of Life, he endeavours to behave so as may be pleasing in the Sight of God : that is his only Care ; *Content* bars the Door against every other.

Let none imagine, that this Virtue is not attainable in publick Life ; and that none but a Recluse, one shut up from the Bustles and Harry of the World, can enjoy this Calm of Mind, this happy Resignation to the Will of God ; or figure to themselves, that it arises from a stoical Principal, a moroseness and pride of Temper, which make Men insensible to, and fullenly careless of what passes in the World ; or otherwise, from a desperate Way of thinking, the being heedless of what becomes, even of themselves ; or lastly, let none mistake an indulging Indolence, or slothfulness of Nature, a Fondness of Ease, and an Aversion to the seeing or hearing what they fancy may give them Pain, for this Equanimity here spoken of ; this *Content* mention'd by the Apostle. For in such Cases, *Nero* and *Domitian*, the one in his Height of Luxury, the other in his Closet murdering Flies, the snarling *Diogenes* were, and the Monks, in *Roman Catholick* Countries, at this Day, are, the happiest among Mortals : the most effeminate, the best Men, and our Saviour and the Prophets, who lived and conversed publickly, are not, in this Regard, to be copied after, as it may be alleged Christ

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could not sin, and the Prophets had a peculiar preventing Grace.

I on the contrary to these extravagant Notions, of retiring to Cells and Desarts, am of Opinion that the World affords more Opportunities for the cultivating this Virtue, which gathers Strength in Proportion to the Attacks made upon it ; as the fictitious Son of the Earth †, was said to rise stronger from every Fall. *Content*, which is the Gift of God to all, who humbly and sincerely implore it, cannot properly be known in a Retreat from the World : for, I fear, what many take for this Virtue, in several Convents and Monasteries, not to judge uncharitably, is rather a prudent Submission to a Course of Life they have not the Power to remedy, which some have too rashly entered upon, from Passion, Disappointment, or perhaps, have been forced into by their Parents from temporal Views.

*Content* is maintain'd in the daily Exercise of Christian Virtues ; in a constant Reflection on the Omnipotence and Omnipotence of God on the one Hand, and on an incessant Remembrance of our own Nothingness, who are the Creatures of his Will on the other : of his Benevolence and daily Mercies, and of our Ingratitude, and repeated Sins. To be truly content, we must not only bravely resolve, but courageously act. Not faintly say, we submit to the wise Disposal of Providence, but prove it, by chearfully yielding to any Infliction he shall please.

† *Antæus.*

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to try us with, and nobly reject, with Contempt and Scorn, any unjustifiable Means to extricate our selves from the Troubles we labour under ; nay, not even admit a Thought tending to any thing which our Conscience, (an impartial Judge) shall pronounce wrong, however covertly we might do it, and whatever Gain it might procure us. This is the Courage necessary, without which, we can never enjoy the Blessing of Contentment : Without we put on the Armour of Christ, his Humility and Submission to Almighty God, and behave like gallant Soldiers, we shall never be able to say with St. Paul, we *have learned in whatsoever State we are therewith to be content.* This leads me to speak in the

Second Place, of the constituent Parts of this Virtue.

Of these, I shall give the first Place to *Piety*, founded on the solid Basis of a sincere Faith. By Piety I would be understood to mean, an unfeigned Love of God for his divine Attributes, and the Mercies he has shewn us, an awful Fear of offending him, not a servile Fear, springing from an Apprehension of Punishment, but arising from a Contemplation of his Goodness. A constant Fervour in his Service, and a reverential Regard for every thing that appertains thereto. The whole Life, of the truly pious Man, is spent in unwearied Endeavours to approve himself

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to his Creator ; the Law of his God is his daily Practice, and thereon does he meditate Day and Night : He constantly pays him the Tribute of Praise and Thanksgiving, and calmly relies on his Benevolence and Mercy.

Such a Man, will be blameless in his Conversation, which is another constituent Part of the Blessing of *Content* ; he will revere the Truth in his Words, and be upright in his Actions : a Stranger to a double Tongue or double Dealing, to Hypocrisy, Malice, Envy or Revenge ; Vices, which are destructive of all Peace of Mind, and which will never admit *Content* to enter, where they have once taken Possession.

A third constituent Part of *Content* is Moderation, by which is to be understood, a wise Contempt of all Superfluities ; the keeping our Wishes and Desires within the Bounds of right Reason.

A fourth Part, is a generous Strength of Mind, to despise all Dangers in the Performance of our Duty ; to endure Want, Reproach, the Sarcasm of the Licentious ; nay, to embrace Death it self, rather than do any one Action, which we know displeasing to God : if we are blessed with this Fortitude ; let us however attribute the Virtue to our heavenly Father, and not presume to take the Glory to ourselves ; for should God turn his Face from us, but a Moment, our boasted Courage would sink into the vilest Pusillanimity ; of which, we have a cogent Example in

in St. Peter, who after having vaunted that he would die for his Lord, was so terrified by a Servant Wench, that he more than once denied him.

These recited Virtues, suppose, a Conscience void of Offence; a Blessing which will enable a Man to bear up with Calmness, against all the Storms of Detraction and Calumny; and this I term a fifth Part.

Sixthly and lastly, which is included in what I have already premised, a stedfast Hope, in the Promises, which God, of his abundant Mercy (through the Merits of Christ Jesus) has been pleased to make us his unprofitable Servants, of eternal Happiness, on our Performance of the Conditions annexed. This Hope will lay before us the wide Difference between what is momentary, and everlasting; between what is perishable and permanent, between what is pure and what is mixt: as the Joys of Heaven admit no Alloy, can never satiate or diminish; and the trifling Pleasures of this transitory World are always blended with Fears, Care, Bitterness and Anxiety, and not only cloy, but are so very fleet, that they pass as a Shade, though the Sting they leave behind them is of long Duration. The true Estimate made betwixt temporal and eternal Good, or evil Things, will give us Courage to contemn the Vanities, the empty Pomp of worldly Grandeur, and make us (in the Pursuit of the future Blessings which we are assured will never end) insensible to the Stroaks of Adversity, and

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and to the Treatment of a wicked World, our Minds will be so thoroughly taken up in the Contemplation of a Crown of infinite Glory.

I have already said, that the Precepts of the Christian Religion, if attended to, are calculated for, and productive of our temporal Good as well as our eternal Happiness. Let us therefore consider the Advantages flowing from this Virtue *Content*, with Regard to the present Life ; which is my

Third Head, and First, from the Nature of it ; and here we find, that none can be said to enjoy any Ease or Tranquility of Mind, in this World, who is a Stranger to *Content* ; for the contented Mind, is the greatest Happiness we can know on this Side the Grave, as may be proved from it's contrast, it makes the poor Man easy in his Station ; whereas, without it, the wealthiest cannot enjoy the Advantage of his Fortune ; the poor Man is exempt from the gnawing Worms of Envy and Ambition, if blessed with this Virtue ; but the **G R E A T**, who are Strangers to it, live and often fall Martyrs to those irregular Passions ; as is evident from sacred and profane History ; in *Joab, Shimei, Haman, Seneca, Sejanus, Belisarus*, our *English Wolsey*, and Numbers of others, who had they studied and practiced this Virtue, would have curbed their Avarice ; humbled their Pride ; put a Check upon their Envy ; abated their Ambition ; moderated their Luxury ; or rather have

have banished it ; and thus have avoided falling into Ignominy and Perdition.

Thus we see from the unhappy Effects of Discontent, or which is the same thing, an immoderate Desire of Advancement, either in Wealth or Honours, passing the Bounds circumscribed by Providence, makes Men incapable of enjoying what they possess, and renders their Lives daily uneasy. *Ahab* possessed of a Kingdom, knew no Comfort craving the Vineyard of *Naboth* ; *1 Kings ch. xxi. ver. 4.* And *Caligula* was uneasy that no Calamities had marked his Reign, to perpetuate his Name ; and apprehended, it would be buried in Oblivion ; as he had not, like preceding Emperours, spread Devastation over the Face of the Earth. *Dionysius*, was grieved, in the midst of Affluence, being the wealthiest Tyrant of his Time, that he could not excel *Philoxenus* in the composing Verses, and have a greater Reputation for Learning, than *Plato* : for which Reasons, he cast the former into a Dungeon, and the latter he banished. *Xerxes*, the *Persian* Monarch, who enjoy'd all the Pleasures the World could afford, was ever uneasy, that he could not invent others, to which, Mankind was a Stranger : but the prudent, the contented Man, can never fall into such Follies, or become a Prey to such senseless Anxieties.

Secondly, we may consider and weigh the Advantage of this Virtue *Content*, from it's having been the Object pursued by all wise Men.

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Men. It was the Sum of all the old Philosophy, and the main Scope of the New. To some it has been imparted by divine Grace : others have attained to this Perfection by the Strength of Reason. *Job*, reduced from the most affluent, to the lowest Ebb of Fortune, was supported by this Virtue. *Jacob's* Desires, were bounded with Food and Raiment. *Agur's* Wish, *Prov. ch. xxx. v. 7, 8, 9.* proves not only his Moderation, but the Danger he apprehended to himself from Plenty. The *Holy Jesus*, who could command all things, was content in Poverty ; for he who made the World had not a Place, where to lay his Head. His Apostles and the primitive Christians, first from their Saviour, and then from one another, learned this admirable Lesson of Contentedness ; and St. *Paul*, who says, in *whatsoever State he had learned to be there-with Content*, attributes this Happiness, this Perfection, which gave him the Victory over himself and the World, to his blessed Master's supporting him. He could do that, and all things else, *through Christ, who strengthened him.* *Phi. ch. iv. v. 13.* But, we have the Example of many Philosophers, among the *Gentiles*, who, by Reason, and by Observation of the Instability of human Affairs only, became famous for this Virtue. *Anacharsis, Anaxagoras, Aristippus, Bias, Crates, Solon, Socrates, Zeno*, and others ; which latter rejoiced at the News of his Fortune being ruined, as it gave him an Opportunity to apply him-

himself to the Study of Philosophy. But to proceed to my

Fourth Head, the Necessity of being content.

And here let us consider this Virtue as our Duty which is enjoined us, and if performed, is replete with Blessings as well temporal as eternal. By our being *content*, we acknowledge the Wisdom and Justice of God, in the Disposal of the Affairs of this World; whereas repining is impeaching both, these his divine Attributes, and will certainly meet with a Punishment adequate to the heinousness of the Guilt; but the contented Man will experience the Favour of his God, and look *whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. Psal. i. ver. 3.* Thus, Reason, Interest, but above both, Religion, stimulate us to the Practice of this Virtue. Wherefore I shall proceed to my

Fifth and last Head, and propose the Means to attain it.

To this End, let us reflect that God, for the regular Government of the World, and the Preservation of Order, has thought fit to introduce a Subordination; different Ranks of Men, endued with different Talents and Capacities; and that he has placed us in such a Station as he knows is best adapted to our Strength or Genius: Let us therefore never, aspiringly, look above us, but thankfully consider those who are in a more humble Station of Life, and in Want of the Necessaries

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we enjoy: but if we are at the very lowest Ebb of Fortune; if we have not Means to guard against the Inclemencies of the Seasons, or to satisfy the importunate Cravings of Nature, let us then examine our pass'd Lives, and impartially reflect whether our own Extravagance, Sloth, or other Vice or Folly has not brought us into this miserable Situation; and if, on an impartial Scrutiny, we can clear ourselves from being the Authors of this Misfortune, these Wants; let us consider from whence they come; that if they are not the Punishment of our Sins, remember they are the Trials which our God is pleased to make of our Virtue: call to mind the powerful Hand which inflicts these Severities, and our own helpless Condition; and instead of repining and growing impatient with Omnipotence, which is kicking against the Pricks, humbly resign to his Will; consider he has provided for and supported us hitherto; that he delights not in the Miseries of his Creatures, is a God of Mercy, and has the Power to relieve us, when we may reasonably despair of all human Assistance. He can raise us Bread out of Stones, and living Springs out of the dry Rocks. When *Hagar's* Bottle was exhausted and she and her Child perishing with Thirst, in a barren Wilderness, God discovered to her a Well of Water. *Gen. ch. xxi. ver. 19.* At another time when there was no Rain in the Land, the same God sent his Prophet *Elijah the Tishbite*, to the Brook *Cherith*,

*Cherith*, and fed him Morning and Evening with Bread and Flesh, by the Bills of *Ravens*, *1 Kings ch. xvii. ver. 6.* when this Brook was dried up, God commanded a poor Widow of *Zarephath* to relieve him, and made an Handful of Meal and a little Oil in a Cruse, multiplied by his Blessing in a miraculous Manner, sustain both him and the Widow's Family, till Plenty appear'd again in the Land. *1 Kings ch. xvii. ver. 15, 16.* Holy Writ affords us other Examples of the like Mercy. Thus, by our reflecting on his Providence, on his Power and Compassion to Mankind, it will enable us to bear up against the severest Adversities, patiently to resign ourselves to his Almighty Will, and to deprecate his Anger. He knows all our Necessities, and if we bear them as we ought, we have, beside the daily Proofs of his paternal Care, several gracious Promises that he will not forsake those who put their Trust in him; and for any Persons, to despise under Pressures, is a Crime so great, that it is plainly declaring we do not believe him, who is the Fountain of Truth; and thus, deprive ourselves of the comfortable Hopes which these Promises administer: in which he obliges himself to maintain us. To conclude, let us constantly bear in mind the Advice of our blessed Saviour; *Take no Thought for your Life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your Body what ye shall put on: is not the Life more than Meat, and the Body than Raiment?*

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*Raiment? Behold the Fowls of the Air: for they Sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into Barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not ye much better than they? which of you by taking Thought can add one Cubit unto his Stature? And why take ye Thought for Raiment? Consider the Lilies of the Field how they grow, they toil not neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his Glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore if God so cloath the Grass of the Field, which to Day is, and to morrow is cast into the Oven, shall he not much more cloath you, O ye of little Faith?* Matt. ch. vi. ver. 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30.

After this energetick Argument of our blessed Lords, I need use no other to persuade every real Christian, not to be over anxious for the obtaining any thing in this Life, but to rely on the Providence of God, and to be able by an entire Resignation to his Will, to bear up with Christian Fortitude, under the severest Trials; that each Individual may say with St. Paul, *I have learned, in whatever State I am therewith to be content:* Which God of his Mercy grant we may all be, to the Glory of his Name, and eternal Salvation of our own Souls, through the Merits of his blessed Son our Redeemer Jesus Christ, to whom with the Father and Holy Ghost, be ascribed all Honour, Praise and Dominion, till Time itself shall be no more. *Amen.*

**F I N I S.**

